

Dragon in my view

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Summary: After the Red Death is killed, Chief Stoick does his best to cope in a brave new world.

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Our boats burn, ash falls like snow, and there's a Night Fury in my view. It fills my view.

My son is nowhere in sight.

Battered scales and ragged leather. Bent steel wire and dark, bruised skin. I could kill it easily now.

"My son... I'm so sorry..."

Lime green eyes crack apart, then open wide. Grief and remorse overwhelm me. I will remain here, unmoving, for as long as the dragon chooses to hold me in its gaze.

The tired wings slowly unfurl. Hiccup is there, held close to the beast's body, a precious cargo to be guarded to its last breath.

Somehow we get them onto the one last boat. There are headwinds. It's going to be a long trip back.

One week later

There's a Gronkle in my view. It's hovering, upside down, ten feet off the ground. Fishlegs dangles there, suspended beneath. He says that he's testing new harness straps, but it looks suspiciously like fun to me. The pair of them are doing this just because they can.

Fishlegs is learning so fast. He says this dragon's a female, and the daintiest eater. He's named her Slobberchops. The Gronkle doesn't seem to mind.

A short distance away, Astrid fusses over Viggen. Nadders like having their scales polished, and Astrid's not complaining. Her dragon gleams brighter than a thousand mallard's wings, dazzling in the early morning sun.

Dragons, Berkers... they all deserve a break. The beasts have moved in, and the village has seen a frenzy of building work. A crash course in dragon ways, and it seems that we're just scratching the surface. At least we know now that Nadders like to roost communally, and that Nightmares are best kept away from wooden structures. Turns out they're all remarkably tolerant, and versatile helpers too. No one's been killed, or even seriously burnt. Who would have thought it, eh?

There's something else going on though, something strange. I feel it when I watch the dragons move among one another, groom each other, fish together. I can't quite put my finger on it. Maybe I'll think it through when my brain's less tired.

One month later

Hiccup is amongst us again. In fact he's recovering quickly now, metal leg and all. The healer doesn't understand his fast improvement. Is my son feeding off the Fury's strength somehow? Toothless has hardly left his side.

Each night the dragon settles by the hearth, and each night Hiccup picks up his blankets and drags himself across to his friend. They spend the dark hours curled against one another. I don't like it much, but I don't have the heart to try to stop it, even if I could. The boy sleeps soundly, deeper than ever he did before.

Recently, Hiccup says he's been dreaming of fish and nightlong flights. We laugh it off.

But this morning he comes to me, terror and delight strangely mixed in his eyes. He whispers something and immediately cowers away. Even now, even after all we've been through he's still apprehensive, scared that I'll take his words as blasphemy. I force myself to pause, and glance not at my son but to his dragon. Toothless looms in the furthest corner, his slit pupils fixed on me. I've never seen him so stern or so determined. Not breaking eye contact, the dark head makes a single, small nod.

The message is perfectly clear. I am your equal in pride, and you should respect me. And if you respect me, respect your son.

I know then that Hiccup's words are true. Dragons are not what we think they are.

Our world has tilted again. And if a dragon should choose to speak to me, what would its first words be?

Three months later

The trading voyage went well. With no dragons to fight, Hiccup and

Gobber had plenty of time for silverwork as well as swords. Our neighbouring villages were amazed at Berk's newfound prosperity. We didn't go as far as mentioning our newfound allies.

Six weeks after we set out, the welcome outline of Berk's harbour comes into view as we round Raven Point. A great press of villagers and dragons has come down to greet us. In the crowd, there's a Viking I don't recognise.

"Chief Stoick!"

But I do know that voice.

"Fff... Fishlegs?"

I can only gawp at him, slack-jawed. There's not much left of the thickset teenager of recent memory. His slimmed down replacement catches me staring.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. You can blame Chops here..."

The youth glances ruefully to the dragon at his side. The Gronkle contrives to look smug.

"I was too heavy for her. Wing loading way too high; I was holding back her endurance and our rate of climb. So I figured I could do with a little less feeding. We're going for plus five top speed and plus ten manoeuvrability!"

Six months later

Daybreak, and I'm up on the cliffs again, scanning the north horizon. This has been my ritual for a week now, although they're not actually due for two more days. The village can do without me for these few dawn hours.

Nothing. I'm not sure I can stand much more of this waiting.

Suddenly, far out, I think I glimpse a dark smudge just above the waves. I squint, and the smudge becomes a speck, then three specks. They slowly resolve as familiar silhouettes, flying in a perfect V straight towards me. The middle Fury has an oddly shaped lump in the middle, and my heart rises.

It's been two months since Hiccup and Toothless departed for the far north. Two months to find and win over the dragon's old clan. Toothless had been confident that this was the proper time, and right here and now, a Night Fury delegation is heading for Berk.

I let Hiccup lead the introductions. He's already taught me the ritual of formal greeting, stressing the importance of getting it right. After that my son takes charge of the show-and-tell as our visitors tour the village. Inwardly I'm grateful: Stoick is well outside of his comfort zone. I'll be firmly in support mode today.

Part of me wonders if the village even needs its chief anymore.

They end up staying for five days. Reticence and reserve slowly turn

to acceptance, a transition accompanied by much vomiting of fish. It seems that our new arrangements have met with approval. Later, Hiccup tells me that it was the sight of human kids playing with some Nadder hatchlings that really won them round. He also says that it won't be the Furrys' last visit.

On the final morning, Hiccup reports that our guests are curious about one last thing. Why, they wonder, has my companion not yet been introduced? I'm puzzled; they've met Gobber, Spitelout and the rest. Then I notice that the gaze of the dark dragons is fixed somewhere over my left shoulder.

I turn, suddenly knowing in that instant what awaits me. He has always been there, if only I'd had the eyes to notice him. Watching my back in wordless support, never assuming, just waiting and waiting until I was ready, until this moment.

Embarrassment is not a look I like to wear often, but I can't disguise it now. Slowly, with calm deliberation, I approach the enormous Nightmare. A shimmer of pale flame races down his back, and the great head rises to meet my outstretched palm.

"Hello, old man. Took me long enough, huh?"

Fifteen years later

They dragged my bed downstairs last week and set it up by the fire, just where we'd put Hiccup's during his recovery all that time ago. It seems fitting, somehow.

Another hacking cough. The sly winter sickness has crept up on my tired bones, and I know that I'll never again see the seabirds return screaming to their colonies in Spring, or tread Berk's lush paths in August as the blackfly dance, or pick the Autumn cloudberry. No warrior's death for Stoick, either. But I am content: Berk is safe, peaceful, prosperous. A new generation has only ever known dragons as friends. My son, healthy and happy. All of this, instead of Valhalla? I'll take the trade.

I would have liked to have heard the seabirds one last time, though.

Earlier, Hiccup and Toothless stood before me, heads bowed. Everything is arranged; they will lead the village jointly in my stead. I sigh briefly as I think on this strange succession. Can we even call ourselves Vikings anymore? Perhaps it doesn't matter. Certainly it is out of my hands now.

There is a dragon in my view, but not the son of lightning and death. Instead, a blur of cinnabar and orange fills my clouded vision. His deep, measured breaths are a comfort as my fingers trace the lines of the long snout one more time.

The night will come for me soon now.

::Until we meet again, old friend.::\_

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